

## Little-known African bird: Mali Firefinch *Lagonosticta virata*

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Un oiseau africain peu connu: l'Amarante de Kulikoro *Lagonosticta virata*. Bien que l'Amarante de Kulikoro *Lagonosticta virata* se trouve principalement au Mali, son aire de répartition connue s'étend jusqu'à l'est du Sénégal et pourrait également comprendre le nord-est de la Guinée. L'espèce est très semblable à la sous-espèce ouest-africaine de l'Amarante foncé *L. rubricata* mais en diffère par l'absence de nuance rosâtre à la calotte gris-brun, le bec droit et étroit, certaines vocalisations (notamment le long sifflement *fee*, le *kyah* nasal et descendant, et le cri d'excitation *churr*) et l'habitat rocheux et semi-aride. Les vocalisations sont imitées par le Combassou de Barka *Vidua larvaticola*, qui parasite le nid de l'amarante.

When Bates, in 1932, described Mali Firefinch *Lagonosticta virata*, also named Kulikoro Firefinch, as a new subspecies of African Firefinch *L. rubricata*, he noted that males have plumage like male *L. r. polionota* elsewhere in West Africa, and female plumage is almost identical to that of the male. Goodwin (1982), based on its calls and broad outer primary, considered *virata* a race of Jameson's Firefinch *L. rhodopareia*. Recent field observations and molecular analysis reveal that *L. virata* is more closely related to Rock Firefinch *L. sanguinodorsalis* and *L. rhodopareia* than to *L. rubricata*, but by its plumage, songs and molecular genetic distance from these congeners, Mali Firefinch should be treated as specifically distinct (Payne 1998, Barlow *et al.* 2001, Sorenson *et al.* 2003, Payne 2004, Payne & Barlow 2004).

Based on specimens, Mali Firefinch occurs in Mali at Bamako, Tienfala, Koulikoro, and Fiko near the Bandiagara escarpment, and in Bamako a bird dealer had Mali Firefinches caught close to the Niger River near San (Payne & Barlow 2004). These few records suggest a limited distribution. Earlier observations of '*L. rubricata*' in Mali (Lamarche 1981) probably refer to Mali Firefinch; the two species are very similar in appearance. Mali Firefinch also occurs in eastern Senegal (Payne 1997), and based on our knowledge of habitat preferences might also occur in south-west Mali and north-east Guinea.

Males have the crown brownish grey, back grey-brown, rump red, tail black with outer feather fringes red; the lores are red, the cheeks, chin, throat to belly deep pinkish red, breast-sides and upper flanks marked with small white spots, cen-

tral belly grey, lower belly and undertail-coverts black; the bill is blackish, base of lower mandible pale blue, and the eye-ring is pink (all as in *L. rubricata polionota*) and the outer primaries are broad, not emarginated (Fig. 1). Females are slightly paler below. Male Mali Firefinch differs from African Firefinch in West Africa in lacking a pink wash to the grey-brown crown, in bill shape, straight and narrow (the culmen is deep and curved in African Firefinch), and in the hand by a broad outer primary. Distinctive field marks are the bill shape and churring calls, and in West Africa the rocky and semi-arid habitat is characteristic.

In voice, the contact call, a wheeze *kyah*, rises rapidly in pitch then falls and lasts 0.2 second; it has a nasal tone. The long-distance call *feeee* is a whistle, maintained for c.1 second, sometimes rising or falling in pitch, or with an overtone. The alarm or excitement note is a rattle *churrrr*, consisting of 20–22 notes per second, loud and mellow, often given in series of three, *churrrr*, *churr*, *churr*. Their whistled trills are much as in African Firefinch. The *churrrr*, *churr*, *churr*, wheeze *kyah* and whistle *feeee* are all distinctive.

Habitat change is the main threat to the species' populations. Mali Firefinches were observed in September 1996 and 2000 in Mali, at Tienfala Forest Reserve (12°55'N 07°42'W) (not in September 1999 and October 2000, as mentioned in error in Payne & Barlow 2004), where Nicolai (1982) had also observed them. The reserve was being cut and the wood sold by the bundle on the roadside, although the rocky hill-sides with grass and shrubs were still intact, as in



Figure 1. Mali Firefinch / Amarante de Kulikoro *Lagonosticta virata*, Tienfala, Mali, 29 September 2000 (Robert B. Payne)

Nicolai's (1982) photograph. This habitat may persist for many years: photographs taken elsewhere show scrubby rocky hillsides to survive near human occupation over nearly a century (Schantz & Turner 1958, Turner *et al.* 1998). Mali Firefinch also appears in the bird trade (Payne & Barlow 2004). Although Mali Firefinch is host to the brood parasitic Barka Indigobird *Vidua larvaticola*, which mimics its calls and songs (Payne & Barlow 2004), the effects of indigobirds on firefinches are negligible in other populations (Morel 1973).

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